DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 666 CG 031 612

AUTHOR Williams-Clay, LaTasha K.; West-Olatunji, Cirecie A.; Cooley, Susan R.

TITLE Keeping the Story Alive: Narrative in the African-American Church and Community.
PUB DATE 2001-03-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Counseling Association (San Antonio, TX, March 15-20, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black History; *Blacks; Counseling; Counseling Objectives; *Counseling Techniques; Cultural Background; Cultural Traits; *Ethnography; Literature Reviews; *Personal Narratives; Resilience (Personality); Therapy
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; Multicultural Counseling; *Narrative Therapy; Oppression

ABSTRACT

Narratives exist within the African cultural ethos then and now in a variety of contexts. For African Americans, one function of the narrative has been the therapeutic effect of ameliorating oppression. Current literature on narrative therapy provides a foundation for discussing the healing power of narratives in the African American community. Narrative interventions such as the Story Circle exercise are considered culture-centered because of its intentional use of African-based mores (e.g., emphasis on community, intergenerational focus, and circularity). Counselors considering culture-centered narratives for work with African American clients need to consider the effective forms of resilience within the African American community. This will allow them to replicate and generalize these forms of resilience within the counseling session. (Author)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 462 666

Running head: NARRATIVE THERAPY

Keeping the story alive: Narrative in the African-American Church and Community

LaTasha K. Williams-Clay

Xavier University of Louisiana

Cirecie A. West-Olatunji

Xavier University of Louisiana

Susan R. Cooley

Pastoral Counseling Center

Presented at the American Counseling Association conference 2001

San Antonio, TX

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. OLATUNJI

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CG031612

Abstract

Narratives exist within the African cultural ethos then and now in a variety of contexts. For African Americans, one function of the narratives has been the therapeutic effect of ameliorating oppression. Current literature on narrative therapy provides a foundation for discussing the healing power of narratives in the African American community(Ani, 1994).

Narrative interventions such as the Story Circle exercise are considered culture-centered because of its intentional use of African-based mores (e.g., emphasis on community, intergenerational focus, and circularity).

Counselors considering culture-centered narratives for work with African American clients need to consider the effective forms of resilience within the African American community. This will allow them to replicate and generalize these forms of resilience within the counseling session.

Keeping the story alive: Narrative in the African-American Church and Community

Storytelling, as a form of narrative, has been exemplified within the African American culture historically as well as in a contemporary context. Narrative has not only been a part of the African and African-American culture, but within mainstream society as well(White & Epston, 1990). As a cultural group, African Americans have used storytelling to transcend the many documented horrors endured during slavery. Ani (1994) refers to the horrible trauma and torture of slavery experienced by Africans in the diaspora as the "maafa." This historical trauma is discussed within the framework of African-American resilience; how Africans in the Americas have endured, prevailed, and at times mastered their oppressive environment.

Slave and ex-slave narratives are important not only for what they tell us about African-American history and literature, but also because they reveal to society and the world the complexities of the dialogue that transpires between mainstream (i.e., middle-class, white America) and Black America (Ani, 1994). The dialogue is implicit in that it evokes spirit, meaning and richness that may not be understood by all people. For instance, songs sung by slaves in the fields were meant for each other and not for slave-owners to understand but became a

coded language among enslaved Africans. This is where slave narratives began. Thus, the birth of slave narratives evolved from the social reality and historical imperative rather than from literary consciousness (Ani, 1994).

The African American slave experience can be used as a guide to understanding resiliency specifically within the African-American church experience: how senses of community and group identification are obtained. As a group, African Americans experience knowing through emotion or feeling (Ani, 1994). The traditional African-American church experience is affective in nature and values the community as a whole while focusing on interpersonal relationships. Within the traditional African-American church, African Americans use music and touch to connect to Self and each other. Songs tend to elicit emotion as they symbolize harmony and an emotional balance within (Ani, 1994).

Stories are told through song and testimony. As a result of the research conducted by the authors of this text, observations in the African-American church suggest that life is guided by songs and stories that unfold over generations within the African-American culture.

This concept of narrative about our lives and experiences has been influenced by the premise of what is called social constructionist theory (Edwards, 1994; Hoffman, 1990).

Narrative Inquiry

"Social constructionism is principally concerned with elucidating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live" (Gergen, 1992, pp.3-18). This theory is based on the notion that ideas about the world are social inventions that emanate from conversations with others. These ideas are based upon the constant evolution of stories people express in their lifetime (Hoffman, 1990).

Stories or narratives are extremely important simply because they shape our lives and relationships. Stories that are passed down from generation to generation are what help guide most of our decision-making. White & Epston (1990) argued: (1) It is the stories in which we situate our experience that determine the meaning that we give to experience. (2) It is these stories that determine the selection of those aspects of experience to be expressed. (3) It is these stories that determine the shape of the expression that we give to those aspects of experience. (4) It is these stories that determine

real effects and directions in our lives and in our relationships.

Conducting A Story Circle

The story circle is oral and affective in nature. Stories tell individuals about their "whole" selves. They share their feelings, thoughts and emotions with other people. They free their spirit in a way that is incomprehensible to outsiders. The term "outsiders," refers to either observers of the story circle, or other cultures that may not be familiar with story-telling traditions in their society.

To begin the process, the facilitator should convene the circle. If the people in the group aren't already familiar with one another, they should introduce themselves. To make it easier, the facilitator may want to introduce himself first, and then look to the person to his left or right to continue. Setting up this way saves times and it gets the group to thinking in terms of moving around the circle. The importance of facilitating a story circle is to maintain a sense of trust and order. It is also important to value listening. Listening is always more important than talking. In addition, it is important to monitor body language within the story circle. By monitoring body language, one may notice hidden messages that are not told in the story itself (Junebug Productions, 2000).

Some people may worry about not being able to come up with a story when it is their time to speak. If you trust the circle, and it is your turn to tell a story, a story should come naturally. If a person is experiencing too much anxiety within the circle, that person does have the option of passing his or her turn. Another important factor is that a person does not necessarily have to like or be able to relate to a story being told, however, that person must respect the other person's right to tell that story (Junebug, 2000).

The story circle tends to create a comfortable environment that encompasses warmth and trust. The facilitator's job is to make sure each person connects the themes and patterns that the stories have created. All stories should connect in some way or another. It is also appropriate for members of the story circle to challenge one another after the story telling has taken place. When it is time to process, members should discuss where they felt connected and focus on feelings and thought processes. The facilitator should also let everyone share responsibility for keeping track of time because it can last a while. Also, a follow-up activity should be conducted for the group as well.

Conclusion

When counseling African-American clients, counselors need to be cognizant of the various cultural experiences that play a

major role in the development of the ethos African American clients. Storytelling still exists today in African-American churches and families. This technique seems to assist African-American clients in understanding their issues better while, helping them to become more capable of handling issues that may arise in the future.

References

Ani, Marimba (Richards, D.) (1994). Yorugu: an African-centered critique of European cultural thought and behavior. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Edwards, T. (1994). Transgenerational development of fatherhood meanings. Unpublished manuscript, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg.

Gergen, K. J. (1992). Social constructionist inquiry: Context and implications. In K.J. Gergen & K.E. Davis (Eds.), The social construction of the person (pp. 3-18). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Hoffman, L. (1990). Constructing realities: An art of lenses. Family process, 29, 1-12.

Junebug Productions. (2000). Junebug's story circle process. http://home.gnom.org/~junebug/story4.html.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). Narrative means to therapeutic ends. New York: W.W. Norton.